

The Acre

Lowell National Historical Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



St. Patrick's and Holy Trinity Churches
Photo by James Higgins

The *Acre*, Lowell's first ethnic neighborhood, reflects a layering of cultures resulting from over 170 years of migration. On nearly every street, hear the driving beat of Latino music and smell native foods like *sousi pa*, *kai lao*, cabbage, and *taskebap*. Southeast Asian and Greek restaurants coexist on the same block. The most striking juxtaposition is the steeple of St. Patrick's Irish Catholic Church reflected in the golden, Byzantine dome of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. The diversity is visible in the faces of the children who speak English while playing with friends, but respond to their parents in their native Khmer, Spanish, or Portuguese. The stories of these families echo those of the many immigrant groups who settled in the

Acre with little but their dreams, beginning with the arrival of the Irish in 1822.

The *Acre* Emerges

In 1822, about 30 Irish laborers walked to East Chelmsford to build the infrastructure for what became the industrial city of Lowell. They dug the canals and excavated the foundations for the factories where the Yankee "mill girls" would work. Not welcome inside the factories, or in company boarding-houses, these young, often single, men built shanties in a swampy area on the outskirts of town known as the *Paddy Camp Lands* or *New Dublin*. Makeshift street patterns developed as people settled in groups that imitated their native counties.



National Park Service
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67 Kirk Street
Lowell, MA 01852
978-970-5000
(TDD 978-970-5002)
<http://www.nps.gov/lowe>

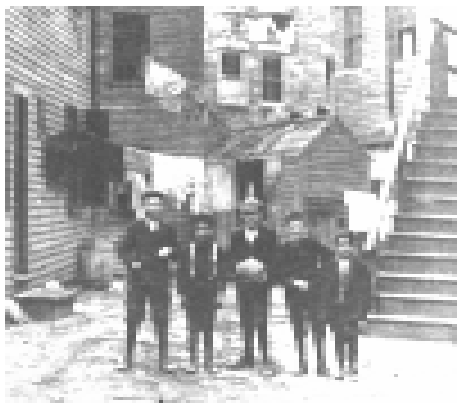


Workers in the Moody St. Feeder
Collection of Lowell NHP

The founders of Lowell never envisioned the Irish as a permanent force in their industrial experiment and made no provisions for their care. Kirk Boott, agent of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company at this time, donated a plot of company land to build a catholic church. This legendary gift of the "acre" of land in 1830 marks the recognition of ethnic groups as a permanent factor in Lowell.

Opportunities

The population of the *Acre* changed rapidly as the doors to the factories opened to all in the 1840s. Yankee "mill girls" organized turnouts for higher wages and a ten-hour workday. During this same period, Irish immigrants poured into the United States seeking refuge from the potato famine. The availability of unskilled jobs attracted destitute families willing to work long hours. Mill owners hired these new arrivals in what proved to thwart the protesters' efforts.



*Greek Boys in the Acre
Collection of Lowell NHP*

Ethnic neighborhoods overlapped as the newer Irish, Greek, and French-Canadian immigrants all settled in close proximity in the *Acre*. Crowded in tenements, entire families often shared one room with no running water. While many of the established Irish moved to neighborhoods away from the noises and smells of the factories, there were always new arrivals to take their place.

The Greek settlement in the *Acre*, with its restaurants and coffee shops representing several villages and towns in Greece, became known as *Greektown* or *Acre-Acropolis*. Men gathered in coffee shops nightly to drink coffee and discuss politics or read the *Weekly Telegraphos* describing events in their native land. Intensely loyal to their homeland, many returned to Greece temporarily to fight in wars. Before setting the cornerstone of Holy Trinity Greek

Orthodox Church in 1906, the community sent an architect to Istanbul to ensure that the new structure reflected their heritage.

By 1940, the need for workers decreased as only three of the original textile companies remained in Lowell. Several buildings in the *Acre* faced the same fate as the factories when they were razed in 1939 to construct North Common Village, one of the first federally funded housing projects in the United States. The destruction of tenements, restaurants and shops dramatically changed the face of the *Acre* as many families moved elsewhere.

The 1960s ushered in the arrival of another new group of immigrants. One factory owner hired recruiters to lure textile workers from Colombia to operate aged machines. These men settled in the *Acre* and their families eventually joined them. The Hispanic community continued to thrive with the arrival of many Puerto Ricans.

The *Acre* Today

Like so many before them, Southeast Asians came to Lowell seeking a better life and found a home in the *Acre*. The newest groups to call the *Acre* home arrived as refugees escaping Communist rule. Imagine losing the freedom to choose what clothing to wear, to worship your own god, or to speak out against these conditions. Over 1.5 million people fled Southeast Asia. Many refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam arrived in Lowell in the early 1980s.

The federal Refugee Act of 1979 offered money to cities that assisted refugees. With employment opportunities at local companies such as Wang Laboratories, Lowell opened its doors.

The Coalition for a Better Acre, the Urban Revitalization and Devel-

opment Project, and the Enterprise Community programs all offer business development and improved physical and social resources for residents of the *Acre*.

The *Acre* has grown considerably, and while time and urban renewal have dispersed communities, its many layers reflect the evolution of Lowell. No matter what changes occur as residents prepare for the 21st century and the next migration, the people and their distinct cultural institutions will continue to reflect the heart and soul of the *Acre*.



*Market Street, Lowell
Photo by James Higgins*

We can all relate in some way with being an outsider. Have you ever moved to a new state? Attended a new school? How did you cope with the changes? *Imagine arriving in a country where you do not understand the language, have no job, and have no home. Many people arriving in Lowell never saw buildings larger than their family homes or more than one vehicle on a dirt road. Acre residents eased the transition for new arrivals through societies like the Washington-Acropolis, the Sociedad de Ayuda, and the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association.*